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UNCLAS BANJUL 002256

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [GA](#)  
SUBJECT: CHAIRMAN JAMMEH RETIRES FROM THE ARMY -  
AS A COLONEL

REF: BANJUL 2197

1- SUMMARY: ON 6 SEPTEMBER A FEW DAYS AFTER BEING PROMOTED FROM CAPTAIN TO COLONEL, CHAIRMAN YAHYA JAMMEH RETIRED FROM THE GAMBIAN ARMY, THUS MAKING HIMSELF LEGALLY ELIGIBLE TO RUN FOR PRESIDENT IN THE 26 SEPTEMBER ELECTION. THE ELABORATE RETIREMENT CEREMONY WAS ACTUALLY A POLITICAL EVENT MADE PALATABLE BY A PATINA OF MILITARY POMP. END SUMMARY

2. IN A CEREMONY AT 22 JULY SQUARE IN DOWNTOWN BANJUL, RECENTLY PROMOTED (EFFECTIVE DATE 28 AUGUST) COLONEL YAHYA JAMMEH RETIRED, WITH SUITABLE POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE, FROM THE GAMBIAN ARMY. THE CEREMONY WAS A COMBINATION OF BRITISH MILITARY TRADITION AND AFRICAN SPICE. OFFICIALLY TERMED A PARADE, THE BACKDROP WAS PROVIDED BY A SHARP-LOOKING UNIT OF ABOUT 250 FATIGUE-CLAD SOLDIERS AND A 30-PIECE ARMY BAND. THE TROOPS MARCHED WELL, AND THEIR OFFICERS AND NCO SHOUTED COMMANDS IN THE BEST BRITISH ARMY SQUARE BASHING MANNER.

3. JAMMEH, AS IS HIS WONT, ARRIVED ABOUT ONE HOUR LATE IN THE USUAL MULTI-VEHICLE CONVOY FROM HIS COMPOUND DIRECTLY ADJACENT TO THE SQUARE. EVEN THOUGH HE HAD NOT YET OFFICIALLY RETIRED, HE APPEARED IN HIS ELECTIONEERING ENSEMBLE (A GREEN BRIMLESS AFRICAN HAT SET UPON AN ORANGE BURNOOSE-LIKE AFFAIR AND A LIGHT BLUE BOU BOU, WITH A TRADITIONAL DESERT WARRIOR'S SWORD HELD IN HIS RIGHT HAND) RATHER THAN THE FULL COLONEL'S UNIFORM ONE WOULD EXPECT FOR A RETIREMENT CEREMONY. THE MASTER OF CEREMONIES READ A SHORT, BUT EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF THE COLONEL'S MILITARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, INCLUDING HIS MILITARY POLICE OFFICER COURSE AT FORT MCCLELLAN, ALABAMA (WHICH HE COMPLETED AS A FIRST LIEUTENANT IN EARLY 1994, JUST BEFORE HIS METEORIC RISE THROUGH THE RANKS BEGAN).

4. THIS WAS FOLLOWED BY A SHORT SPEECH BY THE CHAIRMAN IN WHICH HE STATED THAT WHILE HE WOULD ALWAYS BE A SOLDIER AT HEART, HE WAS GIVING IN TO THE WISHES OF THE PEOPLE AND RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT. THIS MENTION OF HIS CANDIDACY BROUGHT SUSTAINED CHEERING FROM HIS MANY SUPPORTERS IN THE CROWD. HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT THE PEOPLE LOOKED TO THE MILITARY AND POLICE TO MAINTAIN THE PEACE DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN. HE FINISHED BY ASSURING THE TROOPS "THAT EVERYTHING WOULD BE DONE TO IMPROVE YOUR CONDITIONS."

5. HE THEN INSPECTED THE TROOPS WHILE WHAT WAS DESCRIBED AS A 21-GUN SALUTE BY THE MC WAS FIRED IN THE BACKGROUND. THE SALUTE SEEMED TO RUN CLOSER TO ABOUT 13 GUNS, AND THE GUNS THEMSELVES WERE NOT ACTUALLY GUNS, BUT SOMETHING CLOSER TO FIRECRACKERS, WHICH THREE SOLDIERS AT A FAR CORNER OF THE SQUARE LIT AND TOSSED ABOUT 15 FEET, WHERE THEY EXPLODED WITH FLASHES, BANGS

AND SMOKE. UPON HIS RETURN TO THE VIEWING STAND, THE TROOPS MARCHED OFF THE FIELD WITH THE BAND PLAYING AULD LANG SANG, FOUR BAGPIPERS PLAYED A MEDLEY, AND THEN A GROUP OF ABOUT 60 SOLDIERS RETURNED TO THE FIELD FOR A MARTIAL ARTS DEMONSTRATION.

¶6. THIS LAST WAS CHOREOGRAPHED BY ONE OF A TRIO OF NORTH KOREAN MILITARY MEN LURKING IN THE BACKGROUND OF THE CEREMONY. STANDING ON A CHAIR AND GIVING A SERIES OF HAND SIGNALS, THE COMRADE HAD HIS CHARGES CHOPPING, KICKING, FENDING OFF AND GENERALLY FIGHTING, IF NOT AS WELL VAN DAMME, AT LEAST AS WELL AS A GRADUATING CLASS AT ANY NORTHERN VIRGINIA JHOON RHEE KARATE DOJO. THE CROWD LOVED IT. THE FINALE, A BRICK BREAKING DEMONSTRATION, REALLY BROUGHT THEM TO THEIR FEET.

¶7. COMMENT. THERE WERE PROBABLY THREE THOUSAND PEOPLE IN THE SQUARE AND ANOTHER TWO THOUSAND LOOKING ON THROUGH THE BARRED PERIMETER FENCE. MOST OF BANJUL, HOWEVER, APPEARED NOT TO CARE LESS ABOUT WHAT HAD TO BE THE BIGGEST EVENT IN TOWN ON THAT DAY. THE STREETS WERE FULL OF PEOPLE GOING ABOUT THEIR NORMAL BUSINESS WITHIN A FEW FEET OF THE SQUARE, GIVING THE NOISY GOINGS ON A SECOND GLANCE. WHETHER THEY WERE JUST TOO BUSY OR REALLY NOT ALL THAT FOND OF JAMMEH IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SAY. END COMMENT

ROHN